ACTING CHRISTIANLY
John 10:22-30
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"Life used to be so simple.? All of us feel that way on occasion; in the middle of a chaotic sequence of demands, in a schedule already overcrowded. With stress mounting, we know what it is to feel like life used to be simpler. Now it seems there is evidence that our feeling is accurate.

It used to be an "either/or" world. For those whose formative years were the 1930's, 40's, 50's, and even the 60's, personal choices remained narrow, limited and fairly stable. That is the initial assumption in the final chapter of John Naisbett's best seller Megatrends, which has been quoted enough from this pulpit recently to have created a bit of a backlash.

"Many of us," Naisbett contends, "lived simple lives portrayed in such television series as **Leave It to Beaver** and **Father Knows Best.**

"Either we got married or we didn't
(And, of course, we almost always did.)
Either we worked nine to five or we didn't work.
Ford or Chevy.
Chocolate or vanilla."

Sometimes we had a third choice: we could read Look, Life, or the Saturday Evening Post but "It was a society of mass markets and mass market advertising, when homogenized tastes were easily satisfied with few product choices." "Remember," he asks, "when bathtubs were white, telephones were black, and checks were green?"

Today we live in a world of unprecedented diversity: a multiple option society and the very complexity of all the options produces anxiety which in turn is responsble for the still powerful wave of nostalgia which surrounds us. Advertising is still heavily using the "back to simple verities" approach to sell new products and the two actors who played major roles in the old **Leave It to Beaver** series, are now high-priced lecturers on the college circuit.

The fact is that life is not simple. "There are 752 different models of cars and trucks sold in the United States - and that's not counting the colors they come in..." You can, if you have the mind to, locate 2500 different kinds of light bulbs. Naisbitt analyzes. "The either/or choices in the basic areas of family and work have exploded into a multitude of highly individual arrangements and lifestyles. The basic idea of a multiple option society has spilled over into other important areas of our lives: religion, the arts, music, food, entertainment." (Megatrends, p. 231ff)

Life is not simple. Life is made up of choices which seem to be more complex than ever, and the temptation is always to cope with complexity by oversimplifying the issues, retreating to a simpler past - or forcing complex matters into forms which can be dealt with simply.

We catch our breath, when a dear one, dying, squeezes our hand, and comforts us, the living, and says, "It will be all right. Everything is going to be all right." We are stunned by the resurrection when we encounter it in life. And the truth is, that life is the only place it has ever been seen: the life of the world which strangely, mysteriously bears it as a blessed secret; the life of believers who have decided to live as if it were true; and, yes, our own lives - even ours - on those occasions when we have felt, fleetingly, its power.

Martin Marty wrote an essay for Jewish friends several Easters ago. It is a favorite of mine. He said: "Yawn, please, whenever a preacher tries to 'prove' the resurrection. Your boredom will help us face the issue of faith.. Silly putty proofs and reasonings insult you and thoughtful Christians. They convince only the convinced. Nervous apologists have to use logic and history to prove that a tomb was empty. But Easter rises from the experience of faith - then and now."

The Bible doesn't spend much time arguing the case. The four Gospels are literary and historical disasters when it comes to describing the resurrection. Paranthentically, I have always thought one of the more persuasive arguments for the authenticity of the Biblical record is that the writers and editors had every opportunity to polish these four accounts so that they would conform with one another. But they didn't do it. They let the accounts stand as they are. "The New Testament babbles about the resurrection", someone wrote recently. There are major discrepencies in the narratives: different characters are running back and forth, literally bumping into one another; mistaking identities, stumbling around in the dark whispering, some speechless with fright, others sensibly doubting it, still others obviously untouched by it, heading out for dinner in the next town. It takes weeks, months, years, for the people on the spot to assimilate what happened, even to begin to understand it. Most, I have to conclude, never did develop an adequate theology of resurrection. What they most certainly did, however, is live differently, confidently, victoriously, intentionally, immovably because of the power of the resurrection.

St. Paul was a Pharisee. That means lawyer and that means he could not resist having a go at the argument. Unlike the Gospels with their embarrassingly human accounting, Paul presents the academic assertion of the resurrection to his friends in the Corinthian church who were rather skeptical, and then argues, vigoriously, for its truth. The 15th chapter of First Corinthians is classic. Paul marshalls every polemic resource at his disposal and prosecutes the case:

- if there is no resurrection, Christ is not raised,
-as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive,
-what you sow does not come to life unless it dies...etc., etc. ad infinitum.

And then, as his argument winds down, Paul becomes, first an artist. "Lo! I tell you a mystery...O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting? Thanks be to God..." That's music, poetry, art. The argument is over for Paul. It is time for the singing. Second, Paul becomes a behaviorist. "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory... therefore, my beloved...be steadfast, immovable..."

How, in this complex, multiple-option world does one act like a Christian? What on earth are Christians to do? It is not easy. For starters there are two things not to do, and the first is oversimplify. The subway graffiti which read: "Christ is the answer", under which someone scribbled: "I forgot the question" is a reminder to Christians that, theologically, simple platitudes don't make it in this world. Ethically old ideas of right and wrong aren't enough in a world that presents us with a multitude of choices. Acting Christianly means, initially, not oversimplifying.

Second - before we decide what to do we must come to terms with intolerance. It is the very nature of religion to be intolerant. To possess the truth, to be the object of direct, divine revelation is not to be open to dissenting opinion. To be committed is to feel deeply and not to be sympathetic to ideologies which are contrary to one's own. As recently as the bombing of the American Embassy in Beirut and the public claim of responsibility by Moslem fundamentalists we have been reminded of the unholy alliance between deeply felt religion and vicious intolerance. Mark Twain never stopped being astounded at the intolerance of religious people for one another and wrote a short essay once on training various animals to live together in the same space and the impossibility of repeating the process with religious people from different denominations.

Yet there is a toleration which is a mask for unconcern. G. K. Chesterton said once that toleration is the virtue of people who do not believe anything. Acting Christianly in our complex world begins with beliefs which are passionately and profoundly held - in tight tension with regard for the integrity and life of those who do not share our beliefs; whether the issue is prayer in the public schools or the availability of abortion.

How to live in this complex world as an intentional Christian? First of all, be civil. Martin Marty, one of the most articulate Christian thinkers around, is saying that a lot recently. Marty says the trouble with our country is that the committed are not civil and the civil are not committed. What our world needs are committed Christians who are also concerned about the human community. To act Christianly is to respect and affirm the other - even the other with whom we profoundly disagree.

It is, Marty continues, to choose one or two concerns, issues, problems, and to be more morally serious about them. To act Christianly is to know that as an individual you cannot do everything. You have only so much time, energy and passion and you cannot divide yourself efficiently between every issue of public concern. Choose one, Marty advises: choose one which has special meaning for you and for which you have special gifts. Choose one and go after it. Part of it is learning to trust the church and others in the church. You don't have to do it all because there are others willing to choose and act on other issues. You don't have to resolve it all alone. To act Christianly in a complex world is to choose the issue about which you are prepared to think and act with great moral intensity.

"O death, where is thy victory?" Paul asked for all of us. And then instead of the final, irrefutable proof: at that very moment when we are up on the edge of our seats, squinting to see better, cupping our ears to hear it all..this is what he says: "Therefore, beloved...be steadfast, immovable..."

The deepest meaning of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is affirmed, not in eloquent argument, nor in irrefutable proof, but in human lives which are now different, lives described as steadfast, immovable. That is what Paul wanted his Corinthian friends to know; and that, I propose, is the word of God for us this day. Your life and mine can be different because of the event and the reality we celebrate today.

A battle has been won. We have not watched a mythical deity transcend the dirt and sweat of humanity to repose in celestral glory. We have watched, horrified, as God lived within his creation: taking on our humanity. We have watched as our humanity was embraced and affirmed in that man's life; even the occasional senselessness of it, even the unfairness and cruelty and meaningless suffering. We have seen all of it gathered into the strong embrace of a Lord who became one of us. And so our religion happens, not only in our mind and, certainly not in cloistered safety, but right in the middle of it all, on the calvaries of this world if need be.

Fear, for instance, has no more substance. There is no darkness into which our Lord God has not walked. And hatred has been shown for what it is, and love - no longer the sweet sentimentality of the placid - but now, because he lives, the victorious activity of God and all God's children.

And integrity and justice and kindness are shown this day to be the foundations upon which God's creations rests, groaning in the travail to be borne, and yet there, solidly, eternally.

Of course crucifixion is real. Of course suffering and injustice and sickness and cruelty are real. Of course we will die one day and death is real. But these are not the final reality. Because Jesus Christ is risen, the rules have been changed. And life and hope and joy are not seen celebrated as the truth about the creation, and we know that because he lives, we shall live also.

The world needs to know that - today. The world needs to know that love and life are final realities and that their struggle is never in vain. You and I need that Easter promise, as we need food and drink. The reason is that we know a little bit about the struggle. We know about death - and the kind of world which resulted in a crucifixion.

For some of us it is a life-long series of skirmishes. For others, life is a sequence of major battles. For some, it is the requirement to find strength to go on loving and caring and forgiving in the middle of deep and desparate hurt. For some, it is the inclination to throw in the spiritual towel, to accept the end of a dream and to stop wasting emotional energy tilting with windmills that are not as visible as they once were. For some, it is the relentless, gnawing pain of alcholism and the relentless inclination to give up. For some, the end of a rela-

And in that transition another thing happens. The promise is that in serving Christ - in loving the world for his sake - we will know our own salvation. AMEN.

Lord God - grant us hope which never gives up. Give us the courage of strong faith to cope with our complex world. Give us patient love for your world. And as we see to serve you, give us a sure sense of our salvation. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.